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ABSTRACT

Three rural Utah schools received a grant to improve teachers' skills in adapting core curriculum to the needs of diverse students, provide access to teacher support services, and improve inclusion for students with diverse learning needs. The 2-year grant enabled one person to coordinate staff development and provide comprehensive inclusion support. A program of behavioral and academic interventions presented effective classroom practices, tactics for particular problem behaviors, video clips of the tactics, and guidelines for creating a building-level support team for at-risk students. Student-staff support teams, comprised of 3-5 teachers, met when a teacher made a referral. Interventions were selected and an action plan developed. The team met again at the end of the intervention period to discuss the problem's resolution or further action. A program that focused on how students and teachers interact with each other incorporated elements of cooperative learning and social appropriateness. It supported community agreements of attentive listening and respectful communication. A teaching method called Layered Curriculum was implemented that differentiated assignments in a tiered format to meet the needs of a diverse classroom. Teachers helped each other create units of study and accessed a Web site where teachers from across the nation posted teacher-designed lesson plans. As a result of this initiative, teaching skills improved, and the collaborative ethic between regular and special education teachers grew along with their belief in their joint accountability for problem resolution. (TD)

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GRANTED: THREE WISHES TO IMPROVE ACCESS TO THE GENERAL CURRICULUM

Introduction

Wishes came true for three rural schools in St. George, Utah when The Utah Signal (State Improvement Grant: Networks and Alliances for Learning) Project approved a grant to improve access to the general curriculum. Their three wishes were: (1) better skills in adapting core curriculum, (2) better access to support services, and (3) improved inclusion for students with diverse learning needs.

What started as a desire to improve inclusion by a team of eight teachers serving on a district Inclusion Team, turned into a full-fledged project called *The Project to Improve Access to the General Curriculum for all Students*. The project enabled the Washington County School District's Inclusion Team to provide specific support for three schools, Washington Elementary, Snow Canyon Middle, and Pine View High, with comprehensive inclusion support and staff development over a two-year period. Each of the three schools expressed their needs in a letter of support. A common thread emerged from the letters. They all contained requests for (1) assisting regular education teachers in adapting the core curriculum to better meet the needs of diverse learners (2) assisting schools in coordinating existing support, and (3) becoming better inclusionary models through improved practices.

District personnel in St. George, Utah felt somewhat isolated from the professional development opportunities on the Wasatch Front. With three hundred miles separating them from the main populace of state's educators, the opportunity to participate in a project that could lend professional support to their learning community was an opportunity not usually afforded to entire school faculties. Previous models of professional development involved a limited number of teachers participating in the typical sit and get *trainings. Actual costs of attending conferences or trainings were heavily burdened by ten hours of travel, substitute costs, and overnight accommodations.*

Prior to receiving the grant, inclusion efforts were supported by the district's Inclusion Team. Members were special educators and regular educators from elementary and secondary schools. Their training came from Utah's Project for Inclusion, a collaborative effort with the Utah State Office of Education and the University of Utah. Teams of teachers from across the state met together several times a year for training on best practices for inclusion of students disabilities. The blending of regular and special educators provided a forum for sharing the best practices each other could offer. In a document prepared by the Western Regional Resource Center in Eugene, OR, the collaboration of educators in general and special education is helpful for both parties. It states, "The power of special education has been, and continues to be, its emphasis on individualized instruction. As general education becomes more diverse itself, educators are recognizing the need to view all students as individuals. Consequently, at the same time special educators are seeing effective general education practices and environments as appropriate for students with disabilities, general educators are looking to special education for strategies to teach challenging students." With this unique blending of background and training, the Inclusion Team was an example for rest of the district in how to practice inclusion among themselves. They presented several in-services at faculty meetings on topics they had learned. Although well intended, they did not get the results they had hoped for. The lack of time available to fully implement what the schools needed in the area of professional development also hindered their efforts. Together they determined that they wanted to write a grant that would help free up some time for one person to coordinate staff development needs and provide comprehensive inclusion support. Thus, the Project to Improve Access to the General Curriculum for all Students was drafted then approved.

In a reflection of two-year's worth of inclusion activities, a framework has emerged for other schools to consider as they set up a meaningful approach to inclusion and staff development. Now, more than ever, every student's education counts as schools nationwide are striving to meet the No Child Left Behind requirements. Robert Marzano (2000) observed that the impact of the individual teacher could have a great impact on student achievement. His three teacher-level factors; instructional strategies, classroom management, and classroom

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curriculum design, are all imbedded in the grant activities. The grant framework lends itself to any school wanting to improve student achievement by **all** *students by providing teachers with skills and knowledge to achieve the task. Through closer alignment to core standards, and closer attention to the learning needs of a diverse student population, any school can improve their academic accountability. By matching teachers' needs to staff development, success can follow.*

The Grant: Project to Improve Access to the General Curriculum for all Students

The desire to improve teacher training to meet the needs of students with diverse learning profiles was identified through several needs assessments conducted by the Washington County School District Inclusion Team. Given to various school faculties, the results showed that teachers were frustrated in their efforts to try to meet the needs of all students within their classrooms. Concerns center on:

- *low student reading levels and how to teach these students in the general curriculum*
- *how to address the varied learning levels of their students*
- *the need to increase student performance*
- *curriculum adjustments and grading*
- *a need for good co-teaching examples*
- *need for better paraprofessional training*

In January 1999, the Special Education Department of Washington County School District conducted a similar survey among special educators. The results of that survey indicated both regular and special education teachers needed more training in areas of co-teaching, curriculum modification, collaboration, learning styles and building mastery of curriculum. They also expressed a desire to observe classrooms where successful inclusion is happening with time to interview teachers.

The survey and needs assessments indicated most teachers want to meet the needs of all students, and they are willing to learn new techniques to help them. However, many teachers have not been trained in effective instructional techniques for diverse learners that would enhance student outcomes. To assist in this effort, the district's Inclusion Team served as consultants and provided in-service training to those schools requesting assistance from 1996 to 1999. Although effective in solving some immediate problems, the team felt their efforts could be more effective if there were a way to provide consistent long-term support to schools, as opposed to one-time in-service training activities. They wanted a way to solve teacher problems and offer teachers a sustained support system. Limited by time and money constraints, they decided to apply for a grant offered from the Utah Signal Project. Their wishes came true when the grant was approved in August, 1999.

The Project to Improve Access to the General Curriculum for all Students targeted three schools, an elementary, middle and high school, for "full service" inclusion support over a two-year period. In addition it called for greater support to all schools district-wide (a total of 30 schools). One of the team members became the Inclusion Specialist to work full-time on inclusion needs. The target schools were able to develop training specific to their needs. All activities aligned with the district's strategic plan to align and coordinate curriculum, emphasize performance and meaning, build school community and promote personnel development.

One of the primary objectives of the project was to assist regular education classroom teachers in adapting the core curriculum to better meet the needs of diverse learners. According to Kathie Nunley (2001), the average room of 32 students will have four students officially identified by the special education system, another four students she calls "unidentified special education students", two students with an attention deficit disorder and two who have limited English language usage. Add to this their mixed learning styles. Nunley figures "eight will be visual learners, seven auditory learners, and 18 tactile learners who learn best by manipulating material." "Clearly, the more diverse the student body, the more skilled educators must be as a collective instructional body" (Thousand and Villa, 1995). To assist teachers in accommodating this diverse group, the grant proposed activities that would increase the number of teachers (regular, special education, and special programs) with skills necessary to adapt core curriculum to various student needs. Another goal was to assist schools in coordinating existing support services, an area where teachers frequently did not know how to access support services, learning what

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services they had to offer, and eligibility requirements. Such collaboration is necessary so teachers can "share their skills across students and classrooms" (Thousand and Villa, 1995).

To support these goals, a framework was created for the two year project. Programs were selected that were most likely to answer the wishes of the grant schools. Those that had most impact on bringing about improved access to the general curriculum were:

- ***Project RIDE** (Responding to Individual Differences in Education)*
- ***Student/Staff Support Teams***
- ***Tribes**, which re-structures and re-cultures whole school communities while raising academic excellence*
- ***Layered Curriculum™** as a way of differentiating instruction for diverse learners*

What follows is a review of the four programs and how their implementation improved not only the three grant schools, but the entire district.

Project RIDE (Responding to Individual Differences in Education)

Project RIDE, a program of behavior and academic interventions, has been around Utah schools for a long time in one form or another. Once they were contained in binders, then it was found in video format. Now there is a CD version. It has been adopted state-wide in Utah as well as several other states. It can be found in over 3,500 schools across the nation. Once loaded onto a teacher's computer, RIDE can offer teachers help with their most challenging situations in the convenience of their own room, on their own time.

The four basic components of Project RIDE are Effective Classroom Practices, the Computer Tactic Bank, Video Library and School-Wide Assistance Team training. In the Effective Classroom Practices section, teachers are able to check their own practices according to five themes: (1) there are high expectations for all students, (2) instruction is clear and focused, (3) learning is monitored closely, (4) behavior management plans are in place, and (5) there is a positive atmosphere in the classroom. This critical self-check is an important first step for teachers to check their current style of teaching against those found in professional literature. The Computer Tactic Bank is categorized by problem areas specific to pre-schools, elementary, and middle schools. Perhaps most helpful, is the form on describing a behavior. Once the behavior is identified and matched to the problem area, the tactics can be reviewed on the computer and then printed out. The printed tactic can then become documentation of an implemented intervention. Teachers only need to add the date started, date ended, and a statement as to the effectiveness of the intervention. The Video Library contains short video clips of some of the tactics. They are helpful in showing teachers how the tactics are actually used in the classroom. The School-Wide Assistance Team section offers guidelines in creating a building-level support team for at-risk students. A video shows a SWAT team meeting. The book offers several forms that can be used for the request for assistance, the team action plan, and the follow-up report.

RIDE can be a teacher's first line of defense in helping a student. It is a very effective tool when teachers are trained to use it. The premise is that all students are the responsibility of the entire building staff and teachers can be their own best resource. When behaviors improve, academics improve. Thus, RIDE became the first step in reaching the grant's goals by providing teachers with a quick and easy to use tool for handling problem behaviors in their classroom.

Student/Staff Support Teams

Student/Staff Support Teams (SST teams) are also known as Teacher Assistance Teams (TAT teams), School Wide Assistance Teams (SWAT teams), Student Assistance Teams and other various titles. Their objective remains the same: offer teachers help with struggling students. Seen as the next step a teacher can use, the SST team offers another level of support for a student at-risk of failure. By providing formal training in implementing a SST team, teachers were able to see the value of collaborating for the benefit of the student and learn how to access support services available to them. This linkage to support services proved very helpful. For the first time, some saw their own efforts being recorded in the pre-referral process. The importance of the documented interventions and the comments teachers made regarding their effectiveness were now seen as important information, reviewed by

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others in a professional manner. Their collaborative ethic grew as their belief in the joint accountability for problem resolution grew. As they shared the responsibility for student success, more students flourished in classroom.

Teams are comprised of 3-5 teachers. It is recommended that special education teachers not serve as regular members of the SST team. Instead, they may be called in as consultants to the team when their expertise is needed to assess a situation. Members meet when referrals are made to the team. The referring teacher is invited to the meeting. Interventions are selected and an action plan drawn up. The team meets again at the end of the intervention period to discuss the resolution or further action.

Tribes

Building a caring community can contribute to the academic success of many students. Tribes is a program that was introduced to the schools as a way to build "a new pattern of interaction with one another." Formal training was provided to teach collaborative skills with students and other teachers. Started in 1991 by Jeanne Gibbs, Tribes incorporates elements of cooperative learning and social appropriateness. It supports community agreements of attentive listening, appreciations/no put-downs, the right to pass, and mutual respect. "The outcome of the Tribes process is to develop a positive environment that promotes human growth and learning." It provides "structure for positive interaction and continuity for working groups. (Gibbs 1995) A Peter Senge quote from book states, "The way organizations are now is a product of how we think and interact. They cannot change in any fundamental way unless we can change our basic patterns of thinking and interacting so that learning can be a way of life." Changing the way students and teachers interact with each other is the focus of Tribes.

The training for Tribes proved to be a fun community building experience for the teachers also. Fun activities are sometimes not given enough importance in the change process, but with Tribes it laid the foundation of collaboration and cooperation that created a more positive learning environment. The Tribes Learning Community circle shows the relation of inclusion, influence and community. All tie into one another and Tribes definitely helped create a paradigm shift from traditional teaching practices to emerging "best-practices".

Layered Curriculum™

Layered Curriculum is a teaching method developed by Kathie Nunley, EdD. In her book, Layered Curriculum, *the sub-title reads:* The practical solution for teachers with more than one student in their classroom. *It offers core access by differentiating assignments in a tiered format that meets the needs of a diverse classroom. Nunley describes her Layered Curriculum as a "triangular shaped model that encourages higher level thinking by requiring more complex thinking to earn a higher letter grade." The C level assignments ask for general information, rote knowledge, basic skills and concepts. It covers the basic core curriculum. B layer assignments use practical application of lower skills and knowledge to problem solving and discovery. Assignments in the A layer offer critical analysis and critical thinking to the lesson's objectives.*
On an elementary level, Layered Curriculum is sometimes offered with daily choices rather than the A-B-C grade format. The design is most used most often with units. Robert Marzano (2003) reports that, "An instructional framework for units, represents a viable alternative to lesson design. It guides teachers to the most appropriate use of research based strategies but does not constrain them as to day-to-day lesson design." As was found when teachers started implementing Layered Curriculum, their role changed to become a facilitator of learning rather than the sole source of the knowledge being presented.

To support the development of Layered Curriculum, study groups were formed to help each other in creating their units of study. Some core curriculum content areas were in the process of being rewritten as the groups met. The time allowed us to look at the drafts and create pertinent units which linked to the core as it was being revised. Time was spent on the Help4Teachers website where other teachers from across the nation post lesson plans they have designed. More than anything else the grant supported, Layered Curriculum helped teachers see the possibility of making core accessible for all students. Those who participated in the training, continue to use it and refine it. Students were finally in charge of their own learning.

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Summary

It doesn't take three wishes to make the general curriculum accessible for all students. It does take a framework of professional development though. The project proposed by the Washington County School District's Inclusion Team worked because they used programs with a proven track record for success. It was designed specifically to give teachers more confidence in working with a diverse student population. Initial trainings were followed up with one or more review sessions. There were challenges in the course of two years. A new principal was appointed to the elementary school after the first year. The middle school's faculty was divided to staff a new intermediate school. The high school went through accreditation the second year. But, seeds were planted that have grown into better teacher skills. As it turned out, three schools are now much closer to meeting the No Child Left Behind standards. And best of all, more students are participating in the general curriculum with success.

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